

Refereed Article

Blue Collar Choices: Women Who Opt for Nontraditional Careers

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Abstract

This qualitative case study sought to determine the motivations behind women's choice of nontraditional, vocational-technical majors, specifically examining the meaning 11 women at the Pennsylvania College of Technology gave to their life and work experiences that led them to enter these majors. Data were gathered through a phenomenological approach, and analysis revealed findings focused on reasons for entry. Results indicated themes of independence and internal and external influences as they related to choice of major. Conclusions focused on multiple factors contributing to these women's choice of majors. Implications center around career exploration and career choice, recognizing the factors that impact upon these decisions, and the role that adult educators, career counselors, and trainers play in ensuring a proper "fit" between women and their career choices.

Introduction

Women have been a presence in blue-collar jobs throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Prior to the second world war, women who worked were concentrated in such traditional "pink-collar" employment as beautician or clerical work. Women working in manufacturing and industry were most often found in low-paying positions in the garment industry. This pattern changed, however, during World War II, as large numbers of men left the labor pool to serve in the military. Women were then called upon to replace men in heavy manufacturing positions, and by 1945, 38% of all women aged 16 and above were in the labor force (Deaux & Ullman, 1983).

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With the end of the war the public's attitude toward women changed once again as men returned to their pre-war positions in industry and women returned to the home or low-paying traditional jobs (Wertheimer, 1976). In fact, it has only been within the past three decades, as social and cultural sex roles have changed, that the proportion of women in industry has again begun to show an increase (Deaux & Ullman, 1982). Despite this increase most of the traditionally male occupations remain predominately male. It appears that women's role identity is reproduced and passed to the individual and to the group so that little change is occurring within these fields (Willis, 1977).

Women's Motivations in Their Choice of Nontraditional Careers

There is a significant body of literature that presents models to explain women's participation (or lack thereof) in continuing education (Boshier, 1973; Cookson, 1986; Darkenwald, 1980; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Rubenson, 1977). These models include motivators and barriers with consideration to both psychological and sociological variables relevant to participation and underscore the complexity of the impact of the variables' relationships on participation.

These variables also play a role in women's participation in selecting nontraditional college majors and careers. Reasons such as "wanting to learn new things," "enjoying learning," "self-improvement," and "family responsibilities" are found in the literature of adult literacy (Beder, 1991) and vocational education (Kane & Frazee, 1978) and are also cited as reasons for nontraditional choices. In other instances women choose a nontraditional career because it is different from the average, everyday choices that people make. For some, a nontraditional occupation allows women the opportunity to utilize skills learned as hobbies or "play" during childhood (Gangone, 1988) by incorporating skills learned in an informal educational setting into a structured, formalized educational plan (Courtney, 1989).

For many, economic incentive is primary. Jobs that are nontraditional for women pay more than traditional female occupations. A potential to earn higher wages was cited as a motivator in studies by Loscocco (1990) and Read (1992). However, there are other, less tangible reasons motivating women to choose nontraditional fields. Court and Moralee (1995) list the following factors as primary motivators to women's decisions to pursue a nontraditional career: interest in the type of work in-

volved, career development opportunities, and the desire to work in a job not done traditionally by women. Stein, Newcomb, and Bentler (1990) report that women working in traditionally male-dominated professions often gain greater status and experience a greater sense of control and higher self-esteem.

Read (1992) found that the impact of childhood experiences also influenced women's career choices. Women in nontraditional vocations were found to have had, as children, male role models and encouragement to try boys' activities. Anecdotal evidence within Court and Moralee's (1995) study of women in the building trades suggests that having a parent working in a similar area is one of the factors encouraging women to enter technical occupations. Over 25% of the women with experience in these occupations had a parent who had worked in the industry, too.

The literature of women in nontraditional careers illustrates the financial incentives, advancement opportunities, and challenges nontraditional careers offer women. Did the women enrolled in nontraditional majors at Pennsylvania College of Technology choose their fields for similar reasons?

Research Method

This study examined the meaning the adult women enrolled in Pennsylvania College of Technology gave to their life and work experiences that led them to enter nontraditional majors. A qualitative design utilized a case study approach with semi-structured, focused, open-ended interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and thematic analyses of transcribed interviews (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). A phenomenological interview method (Stanage, 1987) was used to elicit data reflecting these women's experiences and the ways in which they put those experiences together.

Pennsylvania College of Technology is a public institution within central Pennsylvania offering educational programs in traditional and advanced technology. It is an affiliate of the Pennsylvania State University and offers associate and baccalaureate degrees with a strong emphasis on hands-on career programs. Its student body numbers 5000; 67% are male, 33% female. Minority students comprise approximately 4% of the student population.

Eleven adult women enrolled in nontraditional majors at Penn College participated in the study. Nontraditional majors were defined as those majors with 25% or less female enrollment based on categories established by the Bureau of Research and Statistics (1994). The participants

were chosen based on criterion sampling, with the specific criteria established prior to conducting the research. Women chosen for the study were 24 years old and above and enrolled either full-time or part-time in four-year or two-year nontraditional college majors. Women who had attempted or completed 40 or more credit hours were targeted.

Initially a list of 23 nontraditional women was generated from a query of the college's student information database. Those meeting the criteria were identified and sent a letter enlisting their help. Participants were also solicited through face-to-face recruitment. Once those willing to participate were identified, purposeful sampling was conducted in addition to "snowballing" to identify women who would be rich sources of data (Patton, 1990). The sample size was based upon the number of participants who could offer information-rich descriptions of their perceptions.

The participants ranged in age from 27 to 48 years of age; the mean age was 36.3 years. No minority student participated in this study. Of these 11 women in the study, 9 had graduated from high school, while 2 had earned GEDs. With regard to learning experiences after high school, 7 had received some training prior to enrolling in Penn College, 2 had earned associates degrees from Penn College, 3 had previous vocational training, 2 had attended proprietary schools, and 1 had military training. All 11 women described negative experiences with education prior to enrolling in college. The majors in which these women were enrolled included architectural technology, computer-aided design, landscape technology, electronics, construction technology, automated manufacturing and heating/ventilation/air conditioning.

Face-to-face interviews were scheduled at times and places convenient for the participants. Written transcripts were made after each recorded interview. Data were analyzed using a thematic approach described by Patton (1990) and Merriam (1988) during which units of meaning were identified and grouped into various categories, patterns, and themes. A list of codes was developed prior to conducting the interviews to assist in classification of data. Selective coding was conducted, and a structural synthesis of themes occurred with the results of the development checked by an auditor.

Findings

Although unable to generalize these findings due to the non-random sampling, the goal of the research was to discover new insights within the

context of the lives of these 11 women. In that manner, a “naturalistic generalization” (Merriam, 1988, p. 176) was possible.

The women’s reasons for entry into college and a nontraditional, vocational-technical major can be grouped into two themes: independence and impetus for the choice. The theme of independence is a subtle one, revealed more often by actions and circumstances rather than by the women’s perceptions and attitudes about themselves. The impetuses for these women’s nontraditional choices are both internal and external and, in most cases, several factors had an impact on their decision.

Each of the 11 women interviewed had a theme of independence running through her story. For some, the return to school and the choice of major was the result of a newfound independence, usually as the result of a divorce or separation from employment. Others’ experiences illustrated the theme as a need for independence, usually based upon economic or work-related factors. Lila provides an example of independence following a factory lay-off after her children had left home:

I had always wanted to come to school. I had raised my family and then got a full-time job, and it just didn’t happen. We had the opportunity to come to school, and I knew if I didn’t do it then, I probably never would do it. So I jumped at the chance.

As a result of independence experienced after the dissolution of a bad marriage and divorce, Marilyn, Lori, Connie, and Sally returned to school. Each described the need to return to school to support her family, but each also expressed a desire to return to do something for herself. Lori’s words illustrate this perspective:

I had been asking my ex-husband to let me go back to school for several years and it was always, “Absolutely not. No way.” I was “too dumb.” I left him in January and by March I had started everything to go back to school.

Although the theme of independence played a strong role in these women’s decision to return to college and enter nontraditional majors, in most cases the decision was a complex one, influenced by many factors, both internal and external. One internal influence was the various aspects of the individual majors that appealed to these women. These women, at this stage in their lives, were choosing a career based primarily upon in-

terest and enjoyment rather than their backgrounds or abilities. They were pursuing careers that offered financial stability, yet they also offered intrinsic rewards. In short, these women chose nontraditional majors simply because they “liked them” and were interested in learning more about that field.

A second internal influence at work was each woman’s background, specifically experiences within childhood. Some of the women’s backgrounds had a strong nontraditional flavor. As children, they were socialized to be little girls as well as what they described as “tomboys.” They grew up with brothers, played with boys, and competed in their activities. The socialization that occurred within their families was influential in the choice of a nontraditional major.

A third internal factor was the process of how these women made their decision to enter a nontraditional, vocational-technical major. For most, the choice of major was not the fulfillment of a lifelong dream but, rather, a case of “settling for” this major. For some, the choice was a gradual evolution, seen as a “stepping stone” from a previous occupation or hobby. Seven of the women mentioned choosing their major after finding their first choice was not offered at Penn College or finding themselves unsuccessful in their first major.

There were several external influences also at work in the choice of a nontraditional career. One of the strongest of those factors was found in “influential others.” Nine of the 11 women interviewed described at least one person who played a role in the decision to further their education and to major in a nontraditional program. Parents, by far, seemed to have been the strongest influence. More than half of the women stated that their parents played a role in their nontraditional choice, while five of the women admitted that their parents had been instrumental in their career choices throughout their lives. In some instances the women gravitated toward a field similar to that of their fathers. Only one woman had a mother employed in a nontraditional area, but several described their mothers as being a source of strength and guidance in their choice of majors. Children, too, played a role in the decision-making process. Several of the women stressed that they wanted their children to see how important school was and felt that they needed to set a good example for their children in regard to education.

College faculty were mentioned by four of the women as being influential—both positively and negatively—in the choice of majors. Joie described a non-credit course that eventually led her to her choice of major:

I took an evening course that Mr. Williams taught about houseplants. It was interesting and he was . . . you know, he's growing these plants and you could tell he really loved them. It rubbed off.

However, faculty also may have played a role in discouraging these women from their initial major of choice. Cathy described an experience that left her doubtful:

I can remember my instructor telling me that construction managers put in 60-80 hours a week. I was like, "How in the world am I going to do that? I have a family." He really discouraged me.

Another external factor that had an impact on their choice was previous employment. While some of the women had experience or exposure to nontraditional careers through the military or factory work, still the experience of others was in areas considered "traditional" for females; although they lacked work experience in nontraditional areas, the experience they had working in low-paying, "pink-collar" positions may have made them more receptive to a nontraditional choice.

A final external factor playing a role in these women's nontraditional choices was their participation in pre-enrollment career exploration. Seven women participated in non-credit programs aimed at defining career goals and presenting career options, both traditional and nontraditional. These women stated that the programs influenced their decision to return to school and provided them with additional options that they may not have considered previously.

Discussion and Conclusions

One of the questions I sought to answer through this study was what led these women to enter their nontraditional majors. For them, transitions and triggers, such as divorce and separation from employment, played a strong role in their motivation to return to school. Like the women in studies conducted by Aslanian and Brickell (1980) and Cross (1981), these women returned to school based upon triggering events and transition periods in their lives (Merriam & Clark, 1991), contradicting earlier studies that asserted that adult women's educational orientation was predominately pragmatic and career-oriented (Clayton & Smith, 1987).

Previous research indicates that having a parent in a similar area was a factor encouraging women to enter technical occupations (Court &

Moralee, 1995). Parents played an influential role in the career decisions of six of the women interviewed, although not necessarily in their choice of a nontraditional major. Three women had fathers who worked in fields similar to their majors. Only one of the women's mothers had been employed in a nontraditional field at some point in her career.

Read's 1992 study revealed five primary factors in women's selection of nontraditional majors: high wages, previous experience in the area, rejection of women's jobs, results of career assessments supporting nontraditional options, and challenges offered by the major. Although they had an indirect impact on the choice of major, the women in this study were not motivated primarily by these factors. They were not motivated solely by wages, and few of them had previous experience in the area in which they were studying. Read's work also reveals a strong relationship between participation in a pre-enrollment program and the subsequent choice of a nontraditional training program. This finding proved true for the women in this study as well. Seven of those interviewed had participated in pre-enrollment career exploration programs, three of them in a sex equity career exploration program. Interestingly, while these seven stated that the programs were influential in their decision to return to school, they also stated that the programs had little or no influence over their choice of nontraditional majors.

For the most part the women in this study seemed to select majors based on reasons similar to those listed in Court and Moralee's 1995 study. Their study indicated that interest in the work and the opportunity for career development were factors that had an impact upon their choice. The women at Penn College held similar views; 9 of the 11 mentioned an interest in the work or some aspect of the major that factored into their choice. The women interviewed were interested in and chose their majors based on the potential for career development. In some instances the women saw their education as a means of "moving on" to another company to allow them to do something more closely aligned with personal interests and goals. In other cases the women were using their education as a "second chance" to enter a profession and build a career rather than continue in low-paying, low-prestige, traditional positions.

Walshok (1981) indicates that the 87 nontraditional women she studied grew up without having a clear sense of the type of work they wanted to do as adults and that few had prepared themselves to pursue a vocation through schooling or training programs. Similar patterns were seen with the women of this study. Most of them did not plan their careers, but,

rather, moved from job to job as the opportunity arose, discovering interests and capabilities along the way.

Independence, both as a result and a need, emerged as a theme within the reasons these women gave for their return to college and entry into a nontraditional major, yet the impetus for their choice was based on a variety of internal and external influences. While these women did not necessarily appear to be “following a dream,” and in some cases had “settled for” their major, all appeared to be happy about the fit and expressed positive feelings about their choice.

Implications for Practice

As women continue to increase in number on our college campuses, it is crucial that administrators, faculty, and advisors understand the motivations causing them to enroll and the factors influencing their choice of majors. All of the women in this study were focused on obtaining a college degree, yet, immediately prior to enrollment, many were uncertain about their academic majors. The results of this study indicate that women selecting nontraditional majors may not be as focused in terms of their choice of majors. While adult educators who are career counselors and trainers need to ensure that they are not reproducing or reinforcing social and sexual stereotypes (Willis, 1977) and biases about nontraditional work, they must also recognize that, in many instances, nontraditional choices are made without a great deal of forethought. It would serve the college, and the women themselves, well to ensure that the “fit” between the woman and her choice is a good one.

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